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PR statement of purpose

Taking stock of the multifaceted universe of positions and goals that constitute Left politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that perhaps a deeper commonality underlies this apparent variety: what exists today is built on the desiccated remains of what was once felt to be possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left, and to evaluate their saliency for an emancipatory politics of the present. Doing this work implies a reconsideration of what we mean by "the Left".

This task necessarily begins from what we see as a prevalent feature of the Left today: a general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The editorial board of *The Platypus Review* is motivated by a sense that the very concepts of the "political" and the "Left" have become so inclusive as to be meaningless. The Review seeks to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches to these categories of thought and action—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke productive disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past might be elevated to an ongoing critique that seeks to clarify its object.

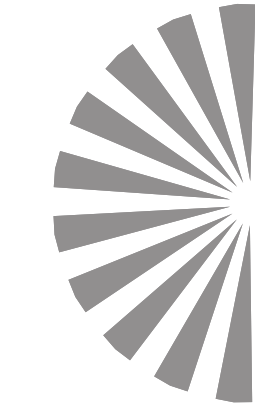
The editorial board wishes to provide an ongoing public forum wherein questioning and reconsidering one's own convictions is not seen as a weakness, but as part of the necessary work of building a revolutionary politics. We hope to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying the variety of positions and orientations currently represented on the political Left, in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that do not find a place within existing Left discourses, locally or internationally. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–2,500 words. But longer pieces will also be considered. Please send article submissions and any inquiries about this project to: [platypus1917webzine@yahoogroups.com](mailto:platypus1917webzine@yahoogroups.com)

The Platypus Review is funded by:

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the erosion of the international socialist revolution over political nationalization took during that decade. With after all, the New Deal was also only one form that the events leading up to it or to World War II for the Left? And, defeat for internationalism. How else could one describe tion. For, in reality, the 30s witnessed the most horrific of the 1930s was directed precisely against nationaliza- others on the Left made in the aftermath of the failures Lettists should realize that the crucial objection Mills and mon practice on the Left of calling defeat victory. Young New Deal imagination is an example of the all-too-com- is in fact none. The Left's current resurrection of the historical development, assuming progress where there of confusion. It involves an affirmative stance towards political decline and this ultimately leads to a great deal Klein, by contrast, fails to recognize the Left in "power elite," as part of the political regression of his time. Lett's decline. He could see the Left, and not merely the circumstances. Mills knew he was writing during the cal light witnessed the establishment of a new, politically The reason Mills was able to view the 1930s in a criti- be initiated today. Mills recognized it as catastrophic. Lettism of the 30s was a recipe for success and ought to so adamantly abhors. But, for Klein, the Popular Front men, precisely the aspects of modern society that Klein er structure that grew closer to big business and military more formidable, national power structure, a state pow- 1930s witnessed the establishment of a new, politically was concerned about exactly how the decade of the are connected within a single political tradition. Mills Hayden celebrate both Mills and Klein as though they reverse of Klein's, though New Left stalwarts like Tom simply follow the later history. Mills's point is the very But the historical analogy is politically incoherent if one to shift the national mood through pressure on the state. Lett is the desire for a more "responsible" state policy. ful Left." According to Klein, the purpose of building a need to make major concessions in the face of a power- in North America—all grew out of the same pragmatic lic health care and state support for the poorest citizens during the 1930s. "workers' protections—pensions, pub- in her bestselling book *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) that, neglected. Take, for example, Naomi Klein, who argued in recent political writing. Mills's insights have been World War II they have come to dominate it." corporate chieftains joined the political directorate, as of Mills wrote in *The Power Elite*, "during the New Deal the source was the shift of power during the New Deal. As the "nationalization of the international left." Another 1930s. One source was Stalinism, or in Mills's words, For Mills the causes of this decline had roots in the become nationalistic or commercial, or merely private." cultural activities, although formally quite free, tend to monopolized by an irresponsible two-party system; States today there is no Left; political activities are appears in 1937–38 plunging the United States back into budget in 1937–38 plunged the United States back into depression, and that it was, therefore, World War II that argue that "Roosevelt's attempt to return to a balanced agrees with critics of neo-Keynesian reformism, who for a new New Deal in the U.S.? It now seems Harvey for a new New Deal in the U.S.? It now seems Harvey Why the U.S. Stimulus Package is Bound to Fail." Harvey too clear. However, in his recent *Platypus Review* article, the potential devastating consequences of which are all peaceful solutions to uneven geographical development, is meant to emphasize the desperate need for more

an otherwise salutary backward glance to the 1930s. For might mean serves as a conceptual blind spot, confusing ernationalism. The very idea of what a reinvigorated Left- progressive" characteristics in the modern nation-state than they are interested in conceptually recon sidering in- to be more interested in discovering certain potentially around what Harvey describes as a novel "spatial-fix," together "democratic, progressive, and human forces" occupation, Harvey sought to prove that by bringing of a "new New Deal." In his book, *The New Imperial-ism* (2004), written in the wake of the Iraq invasion and most adamant proponents, at least in left-wing circles, For some time now, David Harvey has been one of the Deal era is counterpoised. around the problems of high finance, to which the New favor of an ostensibly more economic account centered the defeat of working class politics is often overlooked in However, a political focus on just how the 30s played into cipated a perhaps much-needed re-focus on the 1930s. imagination. In this sense, Harvey and others have pre- last forty years and mark a break with the 1960s political Such thinkers evince a general dissatisfaction with the the recent Nobel Laureate in Economics, Paul Krugman. New Deal," an aim shared by mainstream liberals like has been expressed under the banner of calls for a "new rations for the future. On the American Left, this posture states, or both. They thus look to the past for their asp- of political economy in the service of a more equitable distribution of material wealth within and across nation tion or for a return to increasingly state-centric models spones often emphasize the need for re-industrializa- lical component has been less than adequate. Such re- forty years, including Heartfield's and Harvey's, their po- Yet even for the most imaginative critiques of the last "Green Capitalism," which is also significantly condi- says, this plays neatly into the hands of an emerging the source of the most pressing social ills. As Heartfield phenomenon, crudely denouncing material wealth as movement has taken an affirmative stance towards this field outlines how, in particular, the environmentalist

Despite his misgivings, Harvey's conclusions still in time."<sup>5</sup> is politically impossible in the United States at this point rising wages and redistribution toward the lower classes prospects. As he puts it, "greater empowerment of labor, about the future." "Harvey is pessimistic about current into economic conflict between each other[.] I worry groups decided they were going to go it alone and got "to think back to what happened to the 1930s, when the the end of US hegemony, and says that he has started raises the idea of a multi-polar world which would mark analogy poses this question. In recent work, Harvey also erbate, international rivalries. Certainly, the historical Deal-like policy might actually cause, or at least exac- approach to deficit financing in the New Deal." He seems saved the situation and not Roosevelt's too timid ap- depression, and that it was, therefore, World War II that budget in 1937–38 plunging the United States back into cultural activities, although formally quite free, tend to monopolized by an irresponsible two-party system; States today there is no Left; political activities are appears in 1937–38 plunging the United States back into budget in 1937–38 plunging the United States back into depression, and that it was, therefore, World War II that argue that "Roosevelt's attempt to return to a balanced agrees with critics of neo-Keynesian reformism, who for a new New Deal in the U.S.? It now seems Harvey for a new New Deal in the U.S.? It now seems Harvey Why the U.S. Stimulus Package is Bound to Fail." Harvey too clear. However, in his recent *Platypus Review* article, the potential devastating consequences of which are all peaceful solutions to uneven geographical development, is meant to emphasize the desperate need for more

research, or any other major public works projects, fix," whether through transportation, communication, movement in the United States." The need for a "spatial- imperialism currently offered up by the neo-conservative a new New Deal might assuage "the raw militaristic around what Harvey describes as a novel "spatial-fix," together "democratic, progressive, and human forces" occupation, Harvey sought to prove that by bringing of a "new New Deal." In his book, *The New Imperial-ism* (2004), written in the wake of the Iraq invasion and most adamant proponents, at least in left-wing circles, For some time now, David Harvey has been one of the Deal era is counterpoised. around the problems of high finance, to which the New favor of an ostensibly more economic account centered the defeat of working class politics is often overlooked in However, a political focus on just how the 30s played into cipated a perhaps much-needed re-focus on the 1930s. imagination. In this sense, Harvey and others have pre- last forty years and mark a break with the 1960s political Such thinkers evince a general dissatisfaction with the the recent Nobel Laureate in Economics, Paul Krugman. New Deal," an aim shared by mainstream liberals like has been expressed under the banner of calls for a "new rations for the future. On the American Left, this posture states, or both. They thus look to the past for their asp- of political economy in the service of a more equitable distribution of material wealth within and across nation tion or for a return to increasingly state-centric models spones often emphasize the need for re-industrializa- lical component has been less than adequate. Such re- forty years, including Heartfield's and Harvey's, their po- Yet even for the most imaginative critiques of the last "Green Capitalism," which is also significantly condi- says, this plays neatly into the hands of an emerging the source of the most pressing social ills. As Heartfield phenomenon, crudely denouncing material wealth as movement has taken an affirmative stance towards this field outlines how, in particular, the environmentalist

to say, the rise of "service-sector" employment." Heart- Heartfield has described as "job rich" growth, which is since the 1960s has been the emergence of what James tion. In other words, the most salient economic change by the decline in the importance of "material" produc- single out as critically significant the stagnation caused Some attempts to conceptualize the post-1960s world the 1960s with the 1930s. the Left today in the murky palimpsest that combines layering of political imaginations is that which we see on of a "new New Deal." In his book, *The New Imperial-ism* (2004), written in the wake of the Iraq invasion and most adamant proponents, at least in left-wing circles, For some time now, David Harvey has been one of the Deal era is counterpoised. around the problems of high finance, to which the New favor of an ostensibly more economic account centered the defeat of working class politics is often overlooked in However, a political focus on just how the 30s played into cipated a perhaps much-needed re-focus on the 1930s. imagination. In this sense, Harvey and others have pre- last forty years and mark a break with the 1960s political Such thinkers evince a general dissatisfaction with the the recent Nobel Laureate in Economics, Paul Krugman. New Deal," an aim shared by mainstream liberals like has been expressed under the banner of calls for a "new rations for the future. On the American Left, this posture states, or both. They thus look to the past for their asp- of political economy in the service of a more equitable distribution of material wealth within and across nation tion or for a return to increasingly state-centric models spones often emphasize the need for re-industrializa- lical component has been less than adequate. Such re- forty years, including Heartfield's and Harvey's, their po- Yet even for the most imaginative critiques of the last "Green Capitalism," which is also significantly condi- says, this plays neatly into the hands of an emerging the source of the most pressing social ills. As Heartfield phenomenon, crudely denouncing material wealth as movement has taken an affirmative stance towards this field outlines how, in particular, the environmentalist

THE LAST FORTY YEARS have been conceptually be- wildering for the Left. The withering of working class have coincided with a global shift away from national state-centric (or "Fordist") modes of accumulation towards a more "global," neo-liberal capitalism. David Harvey's work, for instance, has drawn attention to the complexity of this shift by observing its puzzling incompleteness. By focusing on the increasingly uneven and "flexible" geographical development characteristic of recent decades, Harvey has attempted to explain how such diverse practices as computerized high finance, mid-20th century-style durable-goods production (of, e.g., automobiles, refrigerators, and now microcomput- ers), and the rise of "sweatshop" labor—practices rang- ing from the ultra modern to the seemingly historically anachronistic—function simultaneously and, indeed, often interlock in present-day production processes. This layering of social-productive temporalities has vexed the Left for the last 40 years. The contemporaneity of "the present" with "anachronism" has been accompanied by a similar layering of political imaginations, each one seemingly out of phase with the other. Thus, mainstream politics today is characterized by such seemingly incom- mensurate forms as "postmodernism," "decentered," "resistance politics," neo-feudal systems of sociological universality (e.g., Christian evangelism, Wahabi Islam), and the re-mobilization of ethnic particularities (neo-nationalism and subnationalism, and identity politics). But perhaps the most problematic, if seldom remarked, layering of political imaginations is that which we see on the Left today in the murky palimpsest that combines

— Mephistopheles, in Goethe's *Faust*

And yet it circulates as if it were.  
It is as if it had not come to be,  
Now it is over. What meaning can one see?  
When all is subject to annihilation?  
Why have eternal creation,  
Over pure nothing, it is all the same.  
Why over?  
Over! What a stupid name.

Ian Morrison

A response to David Harvey and James Heartfield

Resurrecting the '30s

The Platypus Review

Issue #12 / May 2009



# Progress or regress?

## The future of the Left under Obama

Chris Cutrone, Stephen Duncombe, Pat Korte, Charles Post, and Paul Street

*On December 6, 2008, a panel discussion titled Progress or Regress? Considering the Future of Leftist Politics Under Obama was held in New York City. The Panelists were: Chris Cutrone of Platypus; Stephen Duncombe, a professor at the Gallatin School at New York University and author of Dream: Re-imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy (2007); Pat Korte of the new Students for a Democratic Society (SDS); Charles Post of the Detroit-based organization Solidarity; and Paul Street, author of Barack Obama and the Future of American Politics (2008). The following transcript represents only a portion of a more extensive and wide-ranging discussion. The comments edited and published here chiefly address the significance of Obama's election with respect to black politics. This was not the only theme the panelists discussed and the Platypus Review encourages interested readers to listen to the complete recording of the event at <http://platypus1917.org/category/multimedia/>.*

### Opening remarks:

**Paul Street:** Obama's election represents a historic, but largely symbolic, validation of the deepest aspirations of the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Martin Luther King, Bayard Rustin, and others sought much more than the right of African-Americans to sit at a lunch counter or to get white people to vote for blacks for certain higher offices. They sought a deep assault on the structural and socio-economic bases of racial oppression and inequality. They said such an assault needed to tackle the broader problems of poverty and inequality, and it needed to attack them across racial lines.

The Civil Rights Movement's dreams of radical change were not fulfilled. The Obama phenomenon—like the Oprah, Condoleeza Rice, and, to some extent, Colin Powell phenomena before it—is being used to advance the claim that racism has been transcended simply because there has been a color change in who is eligible to hold the nation's top jobs.

The real Dr. Martin Luther King was a democratic socialist, though this fact does not fit very well with the official, domesticated high school textbook version of him as a polite, middle-class reformer. You may recall Big Brother's maxim in George Orwell's *1984*, "who controls the past controls the future, who controls the present controls the past." We do not like to admit it, but we inhabit something of a corporate, totalitarian political culture, what the Princeton political scientist Sheldon Wolin calls "democracy incorporated." One thing that happens in such a culture is the ubiquitous erasure and deletion of that history which does not conform to received doctrines. So, in the phrase from *1984*, King and Bayard Rustin's radicalism goes down the memory hole.

King warned from very early on in the Civil Rights Movement that symbolic and even substantive victories over southern segregation and racial disenfranchisement posed a danger in that they could reinforce a dangerous majority-white sentiment while, at the same time, people could be lulled into believing that the nation's racial

problem had been solved. To some extent this is exactly what happened.

But it is not just the Obama phenomenon. In some ways, that is just the tip of the iceberg. We have had an erasure, a deletion, of the notion that race is a significant problem. Even the speech that Obama gave in Philadelphia in March 2008 in response to the mushrooming Jeremiah Wright affair was extraordinary in the extent to which it strove to minimize racism as a problem in American life. Jeremiah Wright's anger could be understood and made sense of, Obama seemed to say, because we *used* to really be like that but it does not fit the current situation. When I was at the Chicago Urban League from 2000 to 2005 I had regular contact with young, angry, criminally marked, ex-incarcerated African-Americans on the south and west sides of Chicago. They all had that Jeremiah Wright anger because of things that are going on *now*: how the labor market works, how the housing market works, you name it.

I always distinguish between Level 1 racism and Level 2 racism. Level 1 racism is bigotry and whom you're willing to vote for. Level 2 racism is something much subtler... It does not require whites, or anyone, to be personally bigoted. It is a matter of how institutions are set up and how they run.

**Charles Post:** I want to start from the same place Paul did, Obama and the Civil Rights Movement. I have a slightly different take, which is that Obama's election represents both the incredible achievements and the severe limitations of the Civil Rights Movement up until 1965. This was a social movement that, for all its limitations, effectively smashed legal segregation, the system of racist terror in the South, American apartheid. Obama's victory is the symbolic culmination of that legal, democratic revolution in American history.

Symbolically, having a black man as the head of the U.S. state, a state founded on white supremacy, is quite amazing. But it also points to the fact that the Civil Rights Movement was unable to successfully confront and

defeat racism... It was unable to confront the dominant form of racism today, what Paul called Level 2 racism, institutional racism, racism that is reproduced through, as Marx put it, the dull compulsions of the marketplace. Today most people do not have openly racist attitudes. Still, people can be color-blind and racial domination, racial oppression, can nevertheless be reproduced through competition for jobs, housing, education, etc. In many ways, Obama, as Paul pointed out in his book, is perfectly comfortable with promoting the ideology and politics necessary for the maintenance of institutional racism: the politics of color blindness, the idea that we are beyond race and beyond racism [Obama's main argument for throwing Reverend Wright under the bus].

**Pat Korte:** I'd like to begin by saying that I sincerely hope that the critical and perhaps cynical view of Barack Obama is wrong. I would like to believe that Barack Obama truly is a progressive who bends to the right only to appease the powers that be, and that once he is in office his administration will begin the long process of constructing a political and economic order characterized by equality, justice, solidarity and democracy. However, as both Paul and Charlie have mentioned, a cursory overview of American history would lead one to conclude that this outcome is extremely unlikely.

I am of the opinion that progressive reforms and social revolutions are not by-products of any top-down process. Rather, they result from the popular initiative and creative energy of masses of people. As Barack Obama himself said on numerous occasions, change does not come from Washington, it goes to Washington.

Whether Obama's administration will be progress or regress for America and the world is not at all clear. Nor is it clear what opportunities are currently open for Leftists. But a few things are undoubtedly clear. Most obviously, Obama is the first African-American president and this is a significant step forward for a country founded on white supremacy.

**Stephen Duncombe:** What does Obama's election actually mean to the Left? I think it changes everything and changes nothing.

Liberals, not necessarily radicals, but liberals have decidedly won the culture wars, or symbolic wars, not just in Hollywood but in D.C. as well. The person who got elected to be our president is a mixed-race, latté sipping, cosmopolitan intellectual from Chicago who grew up in Hawaii and overseas. And he won big. He did this without buying a ranch or posing with a shotgun, à la Kerry. I think this actually means something. It shifts the cultural parameters in the United States...

Also, Obama speaks the cultural lingua franca. For instance, there was a moment in the campaign—Obama had just taken a particular beating in a primary debate, particularly from Hillary Clinton, and he showed up to give a speech and did his Jay-Z move [brushes dust off shoulders]—and, of course, the crowd went wild. Now, in one way it is banal, but in other ways it shows that Obama understands... that you have to learn to speak the lingua franca of the culture in which you live. And he was able to do that. With this single gesture he signaled to a

whole bunch of young people, "I understand. I understand your culture. I understand your music. And I am one of you." I thought it was quite brilliant...

Of course, Obama is a centrist who leads a centrist party. His sole objective is to stabilize and preserve capitalism, rationalize the irrationalities, and ameliorate some of the most egregious miseries. Any reforms that may come from an Obama administration will not be intended as stepping stones to any fundamental transformation of capitalism such as Martin Luther King was asking for. Instead, Obama's reforms will be in the service of capitalism's long-term maintenance. They will in this sense be similar to what FDR believed that he was doing during the Great Depression, only much less radical.

**Chris Cutrone:** Obama's election provides a welcome occasion for the clarification of several issues that block the reconstitution of a Left adequate to the present and the future... The confusion encountered on the pseudo-Left regarding Obama has multiple aspects and many tangled historical roots.

On the issue of "race" in America, Obama has been neither a traditional "black" politician nor has his victory been "post-racial." Rather, Obama's campaign expressed a transformation in the way "race" and racism function. His election marks a definite end to the post-Jim Crow period, the period of forms of social consciousness and politics that derived from the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power.

The "Left" has responded to the shift Obama represents with as much fear as desire. Indeed, there has been a great deal of anxiety and regret on the Left about the end of "black politics" as it has functioned since the 1960s.

Prior to his victory, virtually everyone on the "Left" seemed to harbor deep skepticism regarding Obama's chances. This incredulity, I would argue, was rooted in the Left's mistaken understanding and imagination of how anti-black racism actually functions in America today and how it has functioned in the last 40 years.

Unlike some of the other panelists, I would argue that the U.S. today is not racist in the way it was in the 1960s. In other words, when Obama made the claim that Jeremiah Wright was stuck in the 60s, this was not inaccurate. Of course, the change that has taken place has not particularly benefited the majority of black people. Still, there is a need for a new social imagination and a new politics for addressing racism. As Stephen said, Obama's election did not change anything, nor will it, but it did reveal a change that has long been underway.

The ways social conditions in the United States work against black people have changed. Poverty and other forms of disempowerment of the working class function differently today than they did in the 1950s and 60s or even in the 70s and 80s. These changes have been to the detriment of Leftist politics. The fact that such changes as Obama represents are not unambiguously, or perhaps even at all, progressive [in the sense of social emancipation or empowerment], does not mean that important changes have not taken place. It also does not mean that the Left does not need to fundamentally alter its perspective in order to keep pace with these social changes.

*"Obama" continues below*

## Progress or regress?, continued from above



I would say that the "Left's" incredulity about the possibility of an Obama victory, the nail biting up until the last minute, can only mean one thing, that the Left is more racist than the population at large. And this is because the Left is more ideological, and more trapped in historical blinders than the population at large.

The fear on the Left with which Obama's victory has been met is rooted in an attempt to avoid or ward off recognition of the obvious: that earlier forms of politics, specifically "black politics," post-Civil Rights and, especially, Black Power politics, are now defunct. Indeed, Obama's victory raises the question of whether such politics were ever truly viable.

*After opening remarks each panelist was given an opportunity to respond to one another:*

**Paul Street:** A lot of people on the Left thought the race barrier was too high for Obama to win. I actually did not, because I agree with Chris that we are in a new and different period of neo-liberal racism and structural racism, where racism can continue even as people are ready to vote for a black candidate. I think we are both saying that this is a new type of racism. We are not still in the same era. It is dramatic and it is exciting, and it is one of the great living symbols of cultural victories of 1960s movements. We have transcended a lot of that old kind of racism, but the deeper, structural, institutional stuff that Bayard Rustin and King were talking about still remains...

**Charles Post:** I want to echo what I said earlier and what Paul just said, which is that old-school racism—i.e. racism which relied heavily on people having nasty attitudes, openly racist attitudes and behaviors towards

people of color—is no longer, and has not been since at least 1965, the dominant form of racism in the United States. Racism is now reproduced, as Paul pointed out, through the marketplace. Now, I think there is a danger on certain parts of the far Left to say, "Well this means that, in fact, class trumps race." While I firmly believe, with Dr. King and other radical thinkers from the 60s, that addressing institutional racism must take on class issues, it also requires the Left to take up race-specific issues. I believe that color blindness, whether in the way we organize or the demands we make, is in fact going to help reproduce institutional racism. I also believe that the question of what the Brits call "positive discrimination," affirmative action, remains a key question. In fact one of my great worries about the Obama administration is that. Just as it took a right-wing Republican anti-communist to recognize the People's Republic of China, and a so-called liberal democrat to abolish Aid to Families with Dependent Children, it will take the first black president to abolish the remnants of affirmative action in the United States. The question of maintaining race-specific politics is very important for the Left.

**Chris Cutrone:** One of the things that I want to point out about the discussion of race and racism is that, if you say, "well, ok, people are oppressed, not by virtue of people's racist attitudes," what is the point of calling it racism? In other words, it begs the question, if a certain set of racist attitudes have been undermined or been partially overcome, but people are still as bad, if not worse off, than 40 years ago, what sense does it make to talk about the social problem you are discussing as racism? And, of course, as usual, it is affirmative action that comes up. Affirmative action was never an anti-poverty program. It was never a measure meant to alleviate the social conditions of a vast majority of black people. And you would have to say affirmative action worked. That is what the Obama candidacy and election represents. The Left has, over the past forty years, essentially positioned itself as the last line of defense for liberal reforms that are not particularly emancipatory or progressive or working-class oriented. Affirmative action is an example of this. In other words, to say, "The Left needs to be the final defenders, the last man on the barricade of affirmative action," poses the question of what affirmative action can actually achieve in addressing actual social issues. It expresses a fundamental confusion over the nature of social reality and what it would take to change it.

*Two questions from the audience address the issue of race. One asks, "Is 'Level 1' racism really gone?" The other wondered, "Might not calling U.S. imperialism 'racist' actually obscure its true character?"*

**Pat Korte:** I do not think discussing racism or white supremacy together with imperialism obscures the issue of imperialism and the polarization of wealth and power on a global scale. I think that they are actually intimately connected, especially with the United States as the leading power of the imperialist bloc.

**Chris Cutrone:** Obama is right-wing leadership. He is leadership of the capitalist class. That's what he is. He is bourgeois leadership and he is effective. He will be more effective than McCain could have been in terms of now giving leadership to U.S. capitalism and thus to U.S. imperialism. So, racist U.S. imperialism? Well, if a black man is the Commander-in-Chief of U.S. imperialism, what sense does it make to call U.S. imperialism racist?

To get back to the question about old-style racism, in certain ways old-style racism is certainly alive and well. The issue is, how does it feature in society and politics? How does it feature as a social force? The Sean Bell case was raised. This is something that people use to skewer Obama. But all he said is, you have to respect the judge's verdict. Well guess what? Of course you do. Because, on the one hand, that is the system. On the other hand, there was a black cop who was involved in that shooting. In a case of black cops shooting down black people, is it racism? Or is it police brutality? How best to characterize it? What is the point in characterizing it racism? There is only a point to characterizing it as racism if you are Al Sharpton trying to put pressure on the Democratic Party. In other words, to call it racist is to make a bid for capitalist leadership. It is to call for more black cops, to have a black police commissioner, that kind of thing. It is to assert black capitalist leadership. It is not to call for structural transformation.

**Charles Post:** I want to draw a line in the sand, theoretically and politically. I think the reason that we describe imperialism as racist is because capitalism as a mode of production creates not only the possibility, but also the necessity of racism. Race as a category is born when, for the first time in human history, most people are legally free and equal except for people with dark skins in Virginia and Barbados. Race is reproduced, even after the abolition of slavery, because it becomes a way of explaining and justifying how inequality is reproduced in a society where legal status is no longer co-existent with class position. Where we are all legally free and equal, we are all supposedly free to compete for jobs and housing. But yet, capital continues to use race as a way to order the employment queue. This is why we have to continue to talk about race. If we do not talk about race, as far as I am concerned, we are not going to be able to talk effectively about capitalism. I strongly disagree with Chris that the only reason to talk about race is to promote a black, middle-class agenda. On the contrary, the reason to talk of race is to look at the basis of the real divisions among working class people. Racial divisions and racial oppression will not go away simply by pretending that they do not exist.

**Paul Street:** I will tell you, if you have knocked on doors in some rural towns in Iowa with names like "Lonetree," as I have, you will find that Level 1 racism is still going on. I keep waiting for Level 1 racism to have a comeback too. Because when you wipe out the notion that racism is a barrier to black advancement, and yet you still have all these barriers... You have taken away the notion of

racism, but you still see these incredible gaps. How can you explain it except with reference to racism? If you want to know why people call imperialism racist, talk to a veteran. Ask him about the basic training process. Or watch the movie *The Ground Truth* (2006) about all the anti-Arab racism drummed into the minds of GIs getting ready to go to war.

**Chris Cutrone:** Paul said that, in a sense, one would welcome back Level 1 racism in order to make social problems more recognizable. But then that just begs another question: Why is it that we have such a hard time recognizing the social problem, and why do we characterize that social problem in one way rather than another? The reason that I raised is that characterizing social problems in terms of racism tends to benefit a certain kind of Democrat party politics in which black people participate as an ethnic constituency. It is something that the Democrats have always been good at. And, as a result, we end up bracketing the question: Is racism an obstacle to organizing the working class? Is it an obstacle to the politicization and empowerment of the working class? And if it is, then it needs to be addressed that way. I raised the issue of affirmative action, which has nothing to do with working class empowerment, but which rather has to do with set-asides for contractors, for municipal contracts, and with admission to higher education, etc. I pushed on that only because I want to say if the election of Obama seems to mean anything, it is that the supposed intractability of the racism of the white working class simply is not the obstacle that people, ever since the 60s, thought it to be. What does that do in terms of how we think about addressing social inequalities as they exist today?

**Charles Post:** I would argue that it is not just a matter of, "American capitalism needs racism." I would argue that capitalism, as an economic system, the way Marx analyzed it, is both the necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of racism—not just racist ideas, but racist practices. How do capitalists distinguish who to hire and who not to hire? Race, along with gender, along with national origin, etc., are powerful determining factors. So, if you want to talk about building unity within the working class without addressing the fact that workers of color not only suffer the same exploitation as other workers but also and in addition suffer forms of racial domination, racial oppression...if you want to achieve working class unity without addressing this, I do not think you can succeed. Working class unity is not going to be built on the basis of color blindness. That is the conclusion I have reached over the course of my 35-odd years of political experience. In the 1930s, it was only when unions practiced forms of affirmative action, when they took up the demands of immigrant workers, and then black and Latino workers [that working class unity began to take shape]. When the unions dropped these demands, that is when those racial divisions sharpened.

**Paul Street:** We still find, as always with presidential elections, the majority of the white populace vote for



# Symptomology

## Historical transformations in social-political context

Chris Cutrone

Marx ridiculed the idea of having to “prove” the labor theory of value. If Marxian theory proved to be the means whereby the real relations of bourgeois society could be demonstrated in their movement, where they came from, what they were, and where they were going, that was the proof of the theory. Neither Hegel nor Marx understood any other “scientific” proof.

The more concrete the negation of the need, the more abstract, empty and flamboyant becomes the subjective mediation.

— C. L. R. James, “Dialectical Materialism and the Fate of Humanity” (1947)

THE PRESENT CRISIS has prompted numerous calls for a reconsideration of “socialism” and even for a return to Marx.<sup>1</sup> It seems to augur fundamental changes, changes met with no less fear than desire.

We in Platypus have anticipated, since our inception in 2006, the possibility of a “return to Marx,” and have sought to inform the terms in which this might take place. We have sought the re-opening of historical issues on the Left with the intention of their fundamental reconsideration, taking nothing for granted, so that we could definitively close the books on stale “debates” in which the “Left” has remained stuck for more than a generation, since at least the 1960s. Given the confusion reigning on the “Left” today, the urgency for this is evident.

The difficulty in addressing the present crisis of capitalism is that almost all commentaries on it, not least those emerging from the Left, begin with a fundamental misrecognition. We are not so much living through the crisis of capitalism as *capitalism itself is the crisis*. Capitalism is the—permanent—crisis of modern society. Only conjuncturally does capitalism become appreciably worse. But the history of capitalism is, whether in a fine-grained or a broad-gauged way, the history of going from one crisis to the next. It is in this sense that present circumstances and future prospects for capitalism must be addressed.

The election of President Obama is being regarded as an ambivalent phenomenon in this respect: On the one hand, Obama is saddled with responsibility of resolving the crisis merely in order to restore some *status quo ante*, whether this is conceived as the 1990s heyday of Clintonism, before George W. Bush messed things up, or the post-WWII welfare state of the Roosevelt to Nixon years. On the other hand, Obama’s election is taken to express or indicate the possibility for more radical change, towards which his administration might be pushed. But perhaps neither response to Obama is appropriate. Such prognostication ignores the history of transformations in capitalism, of which the present crisis might be only the latest occasion.

Whatever changes may or may not be brought about by Obama (or despite him) in response to the present crisis, his administration cannot solve the problems of capitalism but only transform them. The changes that take place will matter to the extent that they lay the groundwork for the next period of history under capital, structuring the conditions under which any future struggle against capitalism must take place—just as contemporary social forms are the accumulated effects of prior attempts to master the dynamic of capital in modern history.

To grasp the stakes of the present, we need to anticipate potential changes, rather than simply getting swept up in them. We need, paradoxically, to try to remain “ahead of the curve,” precisely because, like everyone else, we are conditioned by and subject to forces beyond our control.<sup>2</sup> For what is missing is any agency adequate to intervening against capital (or, more accurately, to intervening from within its unfolding process) with more democratic results.

The historical forces currently at work are beyond anyone’s, including Obama’s, control. However, the danger that the crisis presents is worse than this, which is, after all, the persistent characteristic of capital. The danger lies rather in the illusion that because of the economic crisis the workings of capital, which before had remained hidden, have now somehow revealed themselves to plain view. To grasp such workings requires more than experience. It requires us to attend to the vicissitudes in the history of *theory*, to distinguish affirmations and apologetics from critical recognitions.

The fate of Michel Foucault’s critique of modern society in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, during its last third and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, can tell us a great deal about both the historical changes since the 1960s–70s “New Left” and the high 20<sup>th</sup> century social-political forms against which Foucault’s critique was directed.

Foucault’s work of the 1960s–70s retains great currency in our time because it expresses discontent in a form that can find affirmation in the transformed society



Film still, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975)

that came after its initial formulation and publication.<sup>3</sup> Foucault’s work was susceptible to being transformed from critique into affirmation and even common sense. This fact alone tells us a great deal about the historical changes with which Foucault’s work is bound up.

If Foucault’s work was expressive of forms of discontent that helped give rise to post-Fordist, neo-liberal capitalism since the 1970s, if the re-found “anarchism” with which his work has such great affinity has become the predominant form of radical social-political discontent on the supposed “Left,” this is because Foucault’s critique inadequately grasped its object, the Fordist capitalism of the mid-20th century. Consequently, when we read Foucault now, his work tells us—and affirms us in—what we already know. Only rarely, and, so to speak, despite itself, does it task us in the present. Only rarely does it help us to separate the critical from the affirmative, so that the one is not smuggled in under cover of the other. Hence, the question necessarily arises: Does Foucault’s work actually challenge us? Or does it merely entertain?

The “New Left” in the 1960s–70s thought it was rebelling against capitalism, and thought it was doing so more profoundly than the preceding “Old” Left was able to do. But now it is difficult to deny that it was responding to one particular form of capitalism, one already in the process of dissolution. The New Left did not reach deeply enough to affect much of the subsequent transformation of capitalism in the 1980s–90s, but it did serve to legitimize the replacement of what had grown obsolete. We read and accept, e.g., Foucault’s work, though we no longer have Fordist capitalism to critique. What we have instead is post-Fordism, of which Foucault’s work and other New Left thinking has become apologetic. If we find affirmation in Foucault, it is because we have long since flown the cuckoo’s nest of Fordist capital and are no longer in the care of Nurse Ratched.

By contrast with theories such as Foucault’s, Marx’s critical theory of capital has come up for repeated reconsideration since its origins in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century,

and will continue to do so, so long as capitalism as Marx understood it continues to exist. The other social thinkers whose work remain subject to such reconsideration—whose thought continues to haunt us in the present—are those bound up in the historical trajectory from which Marx’s thought emerged, those that predate, are roughly contemporaneous with, or are immediately successive to Marx, such as Rousseau, Adam Smith, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche and Freud. Beyond these, the thinkers after Marx who primarily claim our interest are those who most rigorously pursue the Marxian problematic, such as Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lukács, Benjamin and Adorno. This is because, like Marx, the best 20<sup>th</sup> century Marxists were able to perceive and grasp both the most fundamental, perennial historical problems of life in capital as well as the problems of the struggle to overcome them. The recurrent “return to Marx” is thus a feature of our objective social life and will remain so. There is a reason why Marx does not fade as other thinkers do.

In his important 1989 work *The Condition of Post-modernity*, David Harvey provided an excellent account of how transformations of capitalism do not leave old forms entirely behind, but rather reconstitute them. For instance, Harvey argues convincingly that the form of capitalism that emerges after 1973 ought to be understood as *post*-Fordist, as the transformation of Fordism rather than its overcoming, just as 20<sup>th</sup> century Fordism was a transformation of the preceding, 19<sup>th</sup> century “liberal” form of capital.<sup>4</sup>

So the present crisis of post-Fordist/“neo-liberal” capitalism points not to the *end* of neo-liberalism, but rather to its transformed continuation. We will be moving into a period in which are accumulated and reconfigured the historical legacies of all previous periods of capitalism: the liberal one of the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century; the era of monopoly capitalism and imperialism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; the Fordist era of the high/middle 20<sup>th</sup> century; and the neo-liberal era of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The question is whether

“Symptomology” continues below

### Obama, continued from page 3

the Republican candidate. But more than that, even on the so-called progressive side, a lot of the eagerness of Caucasians to embrace Obama is very qualified and it depends on his being a particular kind of African-American, what we writers at Black Agenda Report call the “black-but-not-like-Jesse” or the “black-but-not-like-Al-Sharppton” phenomena. And Obama played that role to a tee. He played it brilliantly. And I guarantee you—knowing Obama a little bit from the south side of Chicago, where I worked for years—he is completely conscious of the tightrope he is walking when it comes to race.

#### Closing Remarks

**Paul Street:** I will leave you with a couple quotes. One is from Adolph Reed: “Elected officials are only as good or as bad as the forces they feel they must respond to. It is a mistake to expect any more of them than to be vectors of the political pressures they feel lurking on them.” And another quote from Tariq Ali and Anthony Arnove: “We cannot look for saviors on high to get us out of this mess. We have to do it ourselves.” And one from Obama: “Change does not come from the top-down, it comes from the bottom-up.”

**Stephen Duncombe:** Obama-mania was a fantasy of politics without politics, a magic bullet. And that is not how change happens, at least not any change I can believe in.

**Chris Cutrone:** In closing I would like to say that I do not think that what we are going to be faced with or, at least, not the most significant thing we are going to be faced with in the next couple of years is going to be disenchantment with Obama, but disenchantment with the Left. I do not think that the anti-war movement is going to come back. I do not think there is going to be an uptick of social struggles. Even if the financial crisis deepens I do not expect it to translate directly into struggle, because the workers movement as it presently exists is not about struggle. It is not about organizing the unorganized. It is not about the things that need to happen. And so I do not think that, again, we are going to be disenchanted with Obama. I think that we are going to find ourselves in a situation that could be salutary in a certain respect, which is that Obama is going to be a consolidation of a right-wing trajectory that has been ongoing for a while now. That consolidation will take a variety of forms. But the important thing is the sort of rethinking this could prompt on the Left, whether in terms of the anti-war movement, or in terms of the way people have struggled against the oppression of black people in the United States. It is going to deal a death blow to the Left as it has existed up until now, something long overdue. What we are seeing is not the overcoming of social problems, but rather the dissolution of inadequate, mistaken, faulty, pathological ways that people have tried in the past to get beyond these social problems. The social problems will remain. What is going away is 40 years of either trying the wrong way, or not trying at all. **IP**

### Resurrecting, continued from page 1

the course of the 1920s, Roosevelt’s New Deal emerged in competition with other major political ideologies, especially Stalinist “socialism in one country” and German National Socialist variants, which also oversaw a period of intense industrialization, and should not be left out of consideration. Of course, while the political differences among these forms matter a great deal, it is necessary to point out how vague the call for national re-industrialization becomes when discussed in solely economic, and not political, terms.

From today’s vantage point, the inability of the 1960s’ New Left to work through the nationalization of the Left has made the marginal character of the contemporary “Left” seem rather well deserved. However interconnected and globalized the world may now appear, politically it is nothing of the kind. The increasingly uneven and “flexible” geographical development, which Harvey so lucidly illustrates, demands a political solution. Certainly, it may seem that the Left is more suited, in its rather shabby position, to fixate on one place at a time. New global relations of production and consumption, like the “China to Wal-Mart route” Heartfield points to, demand a new perspective on international working class organizing. And exactly which industries will become key sites of political struggle, whether it is mid-20th century-style durable-goods production or new, service-sector industries, or both, it all remains highly vague without testing the waters. But new organizational and tactical difficulties should not inhibit the Left ideologically from making bold claims and audacious demands. Moreover, these difficulties should not inhibit the intellectual from laying bare the reality of the past, no matter how daunting. **IP**

[Endnotes]  
1 James Heartfield, “Living Marxism,” *Platypus Review* 9 (December 2008).  
2 David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 210–211.  
3 David Harvey, “Why the U.S. Stimulus Package is Bound to Fail,” *Platypus Review* 11 (March 2009).  
4 David Harvey, “On the G20, the Financial Crisis and Neoliberalism,” interview with Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now*, April 02, 2009, [http://www.democracynow.org/2009/4/2/marxist\\_geographer\\_david\\_harvey\\_on\\_the](http://www.democracynow.org/2009/4/2/marxist_geographer_david_harvey_on_the).  
5 Harvey, “U.S. Stimulus Package,” *Platypus Review* 11.  
6 C. Wright Mills, “The Decline of the Left,” in *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, ed. John H. Summers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 214.  
7 C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1956] 2000), 275.  
8 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007), 317.

### Symptomology, continued from above

this compounding of the problems of capitalism since Marx’s time makes it more politically and theoretically intractable.

Preceding forms of discontent with capitalism historically found their expression (however uncertainly) on the Left, and these were transformed along with capitalism itself. The history of the Left is thus closely bound up with changes in the problem it has sought to overcome since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The exhaustion and underlying despair of the “Left” today can be traced to its becoming lost in a tangle of seemingly insoluble problems that have accumulated since Marx’s time. *None* of the problems raised in the history of preceding generations of the Left have been successfully worked through. All continue to haunt us.

What makes the present transformation of capitalism very different from preceding ones, however, is the absence of a Left, an absence that points to a problem of consciousness. If we are haunted by the past, this is largely in a repressed way. By treating the past as “ancient history” we proclaim it to be no longer relevant. For this very reason, it is unclear whether and to what extent the problems of *contemporary* capitalism have been brought to conscious recognition.

While every historical crisis in capitalism has been met with (premature) announcements of its demise (whether welcomed or regretted), a history of the Left’s conception of capitalism can help us understand the changes that capitalism has undergone. Specifically, such a history would tell us how acutely (or not) the problem of capitalism and its potential overcoming have been grasped on the Left historically, and this, in turn, would help to reveal lingering theoretical problems. By helping us to better grasp the problem of capitalism, we could better understand how it has survived up to now.

The disadvantage with which we approach the present crisis is conditioned by the absence of a Left that could be meaningfully critiqued and practically challenged, as Marx and the best Marxists did in prior periods. There is no Left to push forward. This severely constricts our ability to actually get a handle on the present.

Whereas prior periods provided the Left with a rich symptomology that could be critically interrogated and thereby advanced, the pathologies we must work through today threaten to be entirely phantasmal. We might be left in coming years wondering why anyone ever made such a great fuss about “credit default swaps” and the like. The sufferings of the present might strike future considerations of them as having been quaint.

To better understand the world we need to try to change it. But the paralyzed consciousness on the “Left” prevents any attempt from whose failure we might learn. Still, a critical encounter with the enigmas of past attempts to change the world might help motivate our thinking and action in the present. The restive dead will continue to haunt us, though they might be made to speak. They are the only meaningfully acute symptoms available in the present. **IP**

[Endnotes]  
1 For instance, see: Jon Meacham and Evan Thomas, “We Are All Socialists Now” in *Newsweek* February 16, 2009; and the on-going forum on “Reimagining socialism” in *The Nation*, with contributions by Michael Albert, Tariq Ali, Barbara Ehrenreich and Bill Fletcher, Jr., Doug Henwood, Christian Parenti, Robert Pollin, Rebecca Solnit, Immanuel Wallerstein, et al., beginning in the March 23, 2009 edition with Ehrenreich and Fletcher’s article “Rising to the Occasion.” See also my letter in response, published in the April 20, 2009 edition, on the relation of Marxism to reality, utopia and the necessity for revolution.  
2 See, for instance, recent Nobel Laureate in economics Paul Krugman’s “loyal opposition”—supposedly from the “Left”—to the Obama administration’s policies, signalled by a *New York Times* op-ed column on how the policies were slipping “Behind the Curve” (March 8, 2009), followed by another column, “Conscience of a Liberal” (March 21, 2009) and the *Newsweek* cover story on Krugman by Evan Thomas, “Obama’s Nobel Headache” (March 28, 2009).  
3 See, for instance, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963), *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1971) and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975).  
4 Harvey’s more recent work, beginning at least with *The New Imperialism* (2003), up to and including his recent essay published in the *Platypus Review* 11 (March 2009), “Why the U.S. Stimulus Package is Bound to Fail,” has become more ambiguous if not incoherent, politically. He has therefore fallen below the threshold of the insight of his earlier work, which recognized the pitfalls of the nostalgia for Fordist capitalism that his more recent work evinces. This nostalgia is apparent in Harvey’s call, like others on the “Left” in the grip of the memory of the 1930s–40s, for a “new New Deal.” On the other hand, Harvey repeats standard post-1960s warnings about supposed imperial “decline” that have proven unwarranted through the several crises the U.S. has weathered successfully since the Vietnam War debacle and the collapse of the post-World War II Bretton Woods system under Nixon.



# Film Review: *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*

Sunit Singh

The call to abandon their illusions about their condition is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions.  
— Karl Marx

DER BAADER-MEINHOF KOMPLEX (2008) dramatizes the violence that the Leftist group the Rote Armee Fraktion (“Red Army Faction” [RAF] *aka* the Baader-Meinhof) wreaked across West German cities in the 1970s. The film documents, or, rather, reenacts their streak of violence that started with petty vandalism against storefronts in Frankfurt but that soon escalated into more serious acts. In 1972, the RAF launched its notorious “May Offensive,” which consisted of a series of lethal attacks on U.S. military installations in Frankfurt and Heidelberg; a car bomb outside the Bavarian Federal Police Headquarters in Munich; another explosion at the offices of the Springer Press in Hamburg, which injured a number of workers inside; as well as an assassination attempt on the federal judge presiding over a case in which RAF members were the defendants. Later, in 1975, the group laid siege to the German Consulate in Stockholm. Then, in 1977, the RAF, in a futile last bid to secure the release of their imprisoned comrades, kidnapped the head of the German Employers’ Association and hijacked a Frankfurt-bound Lufthansa flight, in coordination with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. As such, the film asks its audience to consider what, beyond its spectacular or symbolic character, was politically salient about the violent swathe that the RAF heaved in its attempt to foment revolution. The movie also raises an intractable quandary for the Left: How efficacious is the use of violence?

The artist Gerhard Richter offered one answer to these vexations in a cycle of photo paintings *18. Oktober 1977* (1988)—the title refers to the date when the core RAF members committed suicide in a cultish final stand at Stammheim penitentiary in Stuttgart—which were intended as a meditation on our “impotence and helplessness” as modern capitalist subjects when faced with the inescapable dilemma “to work for revolution and fail.”<sup>1</sup> For Richter, who had lived in communist East Berlin, the RAF represented an implausible utopianism. Their death thus marked their emancipation from “the illusion that unacceptable circumstances of life can be changed by this conventional expedient of violent struggle,” from “ideology,” and from the cycle of “deadly reality, inhuman reality; our rebellion; impotence; failure; death.” For Richter, the Baader-Meinhof represented a synthesis of thought and action that is “futile” and outmoded.<sup>2</sup> Later, Richter gnominically remarked that the Left, in the late 1960s, failed to appreciate that the “Dictatorship of the Proletariat” had already been realized under capitalism, albeit in a dystopic form.<sup>3</sup> Yet what Richter treated as

the historical failures of the New Left, the film renders purely aesthetic. It is a shift that marks a wider amnesia on the Left, an amnesia that, then as now, allows the Rightist character of politically motivated violence to be mistaken for progressive anti-capitalism. The film thus naturalizes the shift toward militant action in the late 1960s that Richter lamented as an intolerable solution to the stark dilemma that confronted the German New Left: Either dissolve into Cold War liberalism or social-democratic anti-Communism, or else follow the more drastic alternative and model a hardened militancy on the example of Che or Mao.

Director Uli Edel reanimates the politically fraught era of the 1960s in three staccato sequences. In the first sequence, students are seen protesting in the streets, their ire directed at the Shah of Iran as a patsy of U.S. imperialism. On June 2, 1967, as the Shah attends a rendition of *The Magic Flute* at the Deutsch Oper Berlin, the demonstration outside collapses into chaos. An undercover officer shoots a student, Benno Ohnesorg, in the melee. Gundrun Ensslin (Johanna Wokalek), another Freie Universität student, recoils at the scene. Thereafter, she is adamant that violent resistance is the answer when confronted by an ever more “fascist”-like state—“kill or be killed,” in the words of the RAF’s American counterparts, the Weather Underground. In another scene, Ulrike Meinhof (Martina Gedeck) entertains visitors at a backyard party with selections from a column she is penning on the excesses of the Shah’s wife, Farah Diba, for the radical magazine *konkret*. Her expressions nonetheless belie the ambivalence she harbors toward her own parochially middle-class life as a writer. Meanwhile, the opera incident occasions a debate on precisely this question, What role should “intellectuals” play in relation to the (student-led) Left of the 1960s? As an aside, this is the immediate historical context in which Jürgen Habermas characterized student activism on the New Left, with its emphasis on voluntarist action, as portending fascist tendencies. And, indeed, as the film unfolds, the yearning that Meinhof experiences as a call to action eventually slides into a pathologically untenable antinomy of thought versus action.

Later, when Ensslin is introduced to the volatile Andreas Baader at a hashish-fueled gathering of young Leftists, the new couple resolves to answer the call to arms sounded in a satirical leaflet prodding symbolic attacks on consumerism. Kommune I, the same Situationist group that hatches “the pudding assassination” of Hubert Humphrey, takes its macabre inspiration to



Film still, *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*

incite arson from news reports about a department-store inferno in Brussels that killed over three hundred people. A small, literal-minded group with the Ensslin-Baader pairing at its head sets off explosives at various high-street stores in Frankfurt am Main in April 1968. All of them are promptly arrested. At their trial, we see Ensslin, speaking also on behalf of the other arsonists, remark that the attacks were intended to shake the commonplace “indifference” to the war in Vietnam. Her ex-boyfriend, Berward Vesper, then defends their actions in an article which argues that, in prosecuting these property crimes, commodities take on humanoid traits, while those killed in Vietnam are turned into mere statistics.<sup>4</sup> In the pages of *konkret*, Meinhof similarly contrives to exculpate the property crimes insofar as they interrupt the ceaseless “logic of accumulation” shielded by a legal system based on private property. Still, as Meinhof concedes, “this type of arson does not revolutionize consumerism,” but, instead, “actually maintains the system,” since the destruction of such socially created wealth “contradicts the anti-capitalist intention.” Like the socialist theorist André Gorz, Meinhof tries to argue that capitalism creates “microcosms”

of ersatz satisfaction such that individuals “forget the conditions under which they are forced to work.” But, she also notes that “setting department stores on fire doesn’t raise their awareness about these [unsatisfied] needs [of the collective] either.”<sup>5</sup> All of this occurs before Meinhof abandons dialectics in favor of actionism; that is, all this transpires before she ends up joining the Baader-Ensslin gang.

The various narrative threads in the film are braided together in a scene framed as the International Vietnam Kongress that was held in Berlin in 1968. Rudi Dutschke, who leads both the Außerparlamentarische Opposition (“Extra-parliamentary Opposition” or ApO) and the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentbund (“Socialist German Student Federation” or SDS), delivers a spirited address on Third World “liberation.” He expresses solidarity with the “wretched of the earth” in their role as anti-imperialist revolutionaries. His chants of “Ho-Ho-Ho-Chi-Minh!” crescendo over the lecture hall. The film then skips over the other speakers (Tariq Ali, Dale Allen Smith of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and Ernest Mandel), who presumably repeated other shibboleths of the New Left, but the three main

*“Baader-Meinhof” continues below*

## Baader-Meinhof, continued from above



Film still, reenactment of International Vietnam Kongress, *The Baader-Meinhof Complex*

characters now all appear on screen, fated to cross one another. From the conference, the scene quickly shifts to the brutal assassination attempt on Dutschke, who is shot three times, once in the skull. The attack on Dutschke emboldens Meinhof to write “From Protest to Resistance,” in which she weaves the Vietnam Kongress in with the riotous demonstrations outside the tabloid publisher the Springer Press that had run the advertisement: “Stop Dutschke Now!” For the Left, a further radicalization in a militant direction seemed all but certain. The newly formed RAF was only one of a panoply of hardened sects such as the Bewegung 2. Juni. (“2 June Movement”); the Schwarze Ratten (“Black Rats” *aka* Tupamaros West Berlin); and the Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv (“Socialist Patients’ Collective”), which had its own Timothy Leary-type figure in Dr. Wolfgang Huber.

The RAF articulated its discontents in a manifesto titled *Das Konzept Stadtguerilla* (“The Urban Guerilla Concept” [1971]), complete with its new trademark of resistance emblazoned on the title page: a Soviet star under an Uzi-like Heckler & Koch MP5.<sup>6</sup> This manifesto voiced as dogma what the film is picking up on at an aesthetic level in the scenes in which Baader berates Meinhof as a feckless intellectual or when Ensslin describes everyone but the Baader-Meinhof as an “authoritarian personality,” to take but two salient examples. In these scenes the film shows the RAF’s anti-intellectualism coupled with the group’s own unreflective authoritarianism. As the group’s chief theoretical statement, the manifesto nevertheless merits a closer look than the film itself can provide. Given the “demoralization of internationalism” under the Old Left in the 1930s, as well as the lack of “revolutionary discipline” in the New Left, the Baader-Meinhof declares its intention to contribute

to a “reconstruct[ed] Marxist-Leninism in an international context,” with the RAF as the new metropolitan vanguard. The manifesto then tacks between, on the one hand, identifying with the Old Left as the acme of the “primacy of praxis,” while, on the other hand, preserving a central concern of the New Left, which is that “the [theoretical] cul-de-sac of the Old Left could be avoided [in the future],” a cul-de-sac filled with the possibility of “resignation, provincializing isolationism, reformism, a Pop-Front strategy, and integration.” Thus, instead of problematizing the interrelation of theory and practice in its own determinate context, the RAF sets about putting their “concrete answers to concrete inquiries” into action, as *if* the retardation of objective historical conditions were irrelevant to the critical tasks of the Left—the sublation of capital and alienated labor. This *Denkverbot* (“thought-taboo”) explains why the manifesto chides those intellectuals who insist on pointing out aporias in the student-led New Left. Those who are questioning “the theoretical level of anti-capitalist critique achieved by the students,” remarks the manifesto, are involved in “a trivial competition over whose interpretation of Marx is better.” It should be noted that the manifesto’s own patronizingly ironic conclusion is that theoretical debate excludes workers with its “complicated jargon.”

Thus, even as the RAF admits its “Konzept” is “not based on an optimistic calculation of the prevailing circumstances”—since “capitalism has not lost the ability to repress or integrate its own self-generated contradictions”—the manifesto nevertheless exclaims that “despite the weakness of the revolutionary” the aim is to effect revolution “Here and Now!” Yet their assertion that, “we are neither Blanquists nor are we anarchists” makes sense only when one realizes that the RAF, in

fact, aims to spark a revolution through its prefigurative politics—that is, via an authoritarian attempt to stand outside capitalism by purging themselves of all of its symptomologies. The manifesto therefore counsels RAF recruits to shirk off the labels/accusations of “anti-Semitism/ criminals/ low-lives/ murderers/ arsonists” as “all the shit... applied to [besmirch] revolutionaries.” Still, in its vehement denial of these epithets, the manifesto represses these very tendencies within the RAF, tendencies that the film displays.

Screenwriter Bernd Eichinger, who wrote the acclaimed film *Downfall* (2004) on the denouement of the Third Reich, depicts the RAF as a group susceptible to the virulent strain of anti-Semitism that afflicted much of the European New Left. That is, in spite of the RAF’s disavowal of any connection with Nazism, the film illustrates the fact that the group conflated attacks on Jews with concrete anti-capitalist action. Even before the RAF was formed, the so-called “Black Rats” had tried to sabotage a Jewish Community Center in West Berlin in 1969 on the night that services were to be held to commemorate Kristallnacht. Dieter Kunzelmaan, who helped found Kommune I, had remarked that the German Left must overcome its “Judenkanx” (“Jewish Complex”). “Palestine is for West Germany,” wrote Kunzelmaan from Amman, “what Vietnam is for America.”<sup>7</sup> And, in this vein, we witness the gang undertake a spree of bank heists in its frenetic bid to weaken the “system” as well as the mythical hold of “the Jews.” The camera then follows the gang on a stint to a PLO/al-Fatah campsite in Jordan where they seek to steel themselves for urban warfare, albeit in velvet britches in Baader’s case. The movie captures snippets of the absurd scenes in the desert, none more so than when the would-be German *fidayeen* sunbathe in the nude, much to the annoyance of their Islamist commandant, in response to whose remonstrations Baader retorts—I am paraphrasing—that “the sexual revolution is inseparable from anti-imperialist struggle!” On a more gravely serious note, Ensslin, herself a mother-turned-militant, urges Meinhof to relinquish custody of her twin daughters to a Palestinian orphanage. Meinhof agrees but the scheme is ultimately thwarted. Yet their facilitator at the camp, Abu Hassan, reappears later as the mastermind behind the “Black September” attack on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Imprisoned after a frantic stint on the run in 1972, Meinhof rifles off a “communiqué” praising Black September’s deeds, which she describes as a step toward “the material annihilation of material rule” and “the destruction of the myth of the all-powerful system.”<sup>8</sup> To this she adds: “Israel cries crocodile tears. It used its athletes as the Nazis used the Jews—as fuel to be burned for the imperialist policy of extermination.”<sup>9</sup> Meinhof’s shrill cadence reflects the hardened attitude that thereafter marks the RAF. [For what it is worth, Horst Mahler (Simon Licht), a central RAF member who acted as defense counsel at the arson trial in Frankfurt, is now a neo-Nazi.] From 1971 onwards the RAF waged what the Nobel Laureate Heinrich Böll referred to as “the war of six against sixty million,” while the violence

that the film underscores ultimately ratchets to a climax with the “May Offensive” of 1972.

If the film’s virtue is its unsentimental representation, which neither moralistically criticizes nor apologetically condones the violence it portrays, its weakness is that the RAF remains merely symptomatic of historical circumstances left unanalyzed in the film. The film remains fixated on the RAF’s violence itself since, in the absence of an analysis of the retardation of the *objective* conditions for social revolution in the 1960s, there can be no analysis of the ways in which this affected the New Left *subjectively*. It is ironic to recall, therefore, that the RAF cited the Frankfurt School studies of the “authoritarian personality” in its manifesto, since the Frankfurt School’s conception of the “authoritarian personality” refers precisely to a character structure tied to a weakened ego psychology and a compensatory narcissism which leaves it susceptible to reactionary politics. The film thus naturalizes the history of the New Left in such a way that it reproduces the condition that Freud describes as the narcissistic disorder of melancholia, when a fixation on the past occludes our ability to confront present reality or envision our future. However, on another level, the film suggests that, in the present and in the absence of the actual working through of the history of the Left, all we can do is endlessly reenact the pathological scenes of the past. To the extent that the film puts forth this suggestion, it pushes against its own limits and the limits of our condition of political helplessness. It is this sense of the contemporaneity of the New Left; its sense that the Left today is not so different from the Left of the 1960s and 1970s as some wish to imagine; its sense that the actors of today simply act out in color the black-and-white footage of the past; its sense, in other words, of the *regression* that marks what passes as the Left today—this, above all, is the achievement of *Der Baader-Meinhof Complex*. **IP**

[Endnotes]

- Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings 1960-1993* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 194.
- Ibid.*, 178.
- Ibid.*, 221.
- Jeremy Voron, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 202.
- Ulrike Marie Meinhof, *Everybody Talks About the Weather—We Don’t: The Writings of Ulrike Meinhof*, translated by Karin Bauer (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008), 244-246.
- A number of RAF “communiqués” can be found at <http://labourhistory.net/raf/browse.php>. Some rough English translations are also available online at <http://www.baader-meinhof.com>.
- Jeffery Herf, “Ideology and Terror in Germany,” *Telos* 144 (Fall 2008): 23.
- Stefan Aust, *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (London: The Bodley Head, 2008), 182.
- Meinhof cited in Herf, “Ideology and Terror,” 28.